

Two Views: Degrees of Punishment

by **David Lee Burris**



CHRISTIAN
COURIER 





Questions and Answers

The Old Moulton Rd. church of Christ

Question:

We address a question that some have raised from Luke 12:41-48, namely, "Are there varying degrees of punishment in hell? Also, are there different degrees of reward in heaven?"

Answer:

This question arises from the following passage in Jesus' teaching, as well as some other passages:

And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more (Luke 12:47-48).

As the reader might observe, the two verses quoted above are part of a larger section where Jesus considers what it means to be a faithful and wise steward (servant); or its opposite, an unfaithful and unwise one, including the punishment due the latter. It might appear to some that Jesus here implied varying degrees of punishment in hell as He spoke of the many stripes and the few stripes, but such an implication is not necessary. "Stripes" refers first to the temporal punishment given to the servant, and then, by implication, is to the punishment suffered in the fire of hell by others. Is there perhaps another explanation which better fits the whole of Biblical teaching about eternal punishment?

When asked this same question concerning degrees in heaven, David Lipscomb answered many years ago:

We do not know. Christ came to this world to break down middle walls of division and to make the different families, tribes, and nations of earth one new man. **We do not think that he has erected divisions or barriers between the redeemed in the world to come.** If there be difference there, it will arise from different capacities for enjoyment. Some of the elite, the polished, the cultivated, think it a little hard to have to associate with the uncultivated clodhoppers and unpolished working women of the country and the town in the world to come; and so the idea has become rather prevalent that they will have a higher sphere nearer the heavenly throne than the mechanics of the cities and the country boors who are Christians. But we have never found any Scripture authority for such an idea. It has its origin in the foolish ambition of some who have but little chance for a home in the better land. If there be differences in capacity for enjoyment there, the higher capacity will not be measured by any intellectual culture, by polished manners or cultivated taste or high family there, but by self-sacrificing, self-denying devotion to the honor of God and the good of man here (*Questions Answered*, by Lipscomb & Sewell, p. 173).

Whether with or without the same motivation for the idea, some still see in Jesus' teaching basis for varying degrees of eternal punishment operating in hell, so that the hottest section is reserved for the worst offenders and the other sections for those of less degrees of offense.

I find it more reasonable to conclude that the differing degrees refer to degrees of enjoyment in heaven or punishment in hell. People who have known of the joys of serving the Lord, but then deserted Him, shall experience even more conscience-imposed suffering than those who never served Him because they know what they are missing! Their capacities for such enjoyment and their awareness of what they could have enjoyed are greater. This does not mitigate the fact that all of the saved will enjoy blessings and all of the lost be punished.

Another passage where some find reason for their conclusion is Matthew 11:21-24:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.

Jesus obviously taught here that those with the greater opportunities, which they had spurned, will definitely be judged by stricter standard than Sodom, though even Sodom will suffer judgment. This very same principle might also be involved in the Parable of the Wicked Servant in Luke 12:47-48.

It is certain, nevertheless, that all who go to heaven will be blessed of the Lord so that they enjoy it as fully as their ability allows. Their preparation in this life, however, will determine how much they can enjoy heaven. It is likewise just as certain that all of the lost in hell will suffer eternal punishment, with some suffering more than others, possibly because of their rejected opportunities.

Are There Degrees of Punishment? Luke 12:47–48

Hugh DeLong

“THIS PASSAGE CLEARLY TEACHES DEGREES of punishment in hell. The few stripes are also eternal punishment, but the doom of the greater sinner will be terrible. ‘Shall cut him asunder’ means to kill (v. 46), but hell is itself a living death so that the figurative declarations of the parable must represent degrees of punishment in hell” (R. C. Foster, *Studies in the Life of Christ*, p. 891). Simple enough. But we can also read, “A popular notion is that it teaches degrees of punishment after the judgment. By the process of elimination we know it cannot mean that” (E. M. Zerr, *Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5, p. 168). In short, does this passage teach degrees of punishment in hell or does it not?

In considering any verse one can often find some help by studying parallel passages—especially is this true in the gospels. The problem here is that there are no parallel passages. There are other Scriptures that are used to teach degrees of punishment — but even then they would at most only help establish the possibility of such teaching here. Hence, we are left to consider this passage in its context.

Let us notice the context of these verses. Jesus has taught the disciples that they are to seek first the kingdom of God, verses 31–34. He then taught the principle of watchfulness — “blessed are those servants, whom the lord, when he cometh, shall find watching” (v 37). Peter then asks the question, “Lord, speakest thou this parable unto us, or even to all?” It is in response to this question that we have Jesus’ parable. *Let me briefly outline this discourse.*

- 1. The Question:** who is that faithful and wise servant (verse 34)?
- 2. The Answer:** the one the Lord finds “so doing” (i.e., being watchful, verses 35–40).
- 3. The Reward:** made ruler over all that the Lord has (verse 44).
- 4. The Peril:** that same servant may be evil—not watchful (v 45).
- 5. The Penalty:** “cut asunder,” assigned a place with unbelievers (verse 46).

Up to this point the lesson is easy to understand. What about verses 47–48, though? Do they describe the punishment to be received? Or do they describe basis of the judgment? Here is the crux of the problem.

Most people understand, as did Foster, that the central thought is the character of the *punishment* received after the judgment rather than the character of the *judgment* itself. Hence, verses 47–48 become a restatement of the punishment of verse 46.

Others understand that the picture in verses 47–48 illustrates the *reason* for such a hard judgment upon the unfaithful servant. To them **these verses are better to be understood as the principle of “degrees of responsibility”** rather than a picture of what hell is like. The main reason for such an interpretation is found at the end of verse 48. Here the sentence begins with “For” and shows Jesus’ application of this story. He states: *“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required; and to whom men have committed much, of him will they ask the more.”* Thus, in answer to Peter’s question, Jesus said that it applies to those who hear it. If one has learned, he’s then under obligation to practice the teaching. Peter had already been taught these things—they are then spoken to Peter. The main point is shown to be the character of the judgment—it is based upon responsibility. Should we go on and press the other incidentals of the parable, thus seeing degrees of punishment in hell? I think not.

My conclusion is that these verses were meant to teach degrees of responsibility and not degrees of hell punishment. **“Does this passage teach degrees of punishment in hell? No wise servant should have to learn the lesson by experience. That punishment is too awful for the mind to fully appreciate how terrible it is. The wise person will do all that is necessary to avoid it completely. Hell is prepared for the devil and his angels”** (T. R. Applebury, *Studies in Luke*, p. 242).

In fact, I hope that we never have to find out if there are any degrees of punishment in hell!

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¹ DeLong, H. (1985). [Are There Degrees of Punishment?: Luke 12:47–48](#). (B. Lewis, Ed.) *Christianity Magazine*, 2(4), 13.



WALKING THROUGH THE BIBLE

**Are There Degrees Of
Punishment In Hell?**

Luke 12: 41-48 (Lesson 68)



Are Some Sins Greater than the Others?



CHRISTIAN
COURIER 

*Are some sins “greater” than others? There is a sense in which **any** sin will condemn. There is another sense in which greater **responsibility** is attached to some acts.*

Question: When Jesus was on trial before Pilate, he said: “He who delivers me unto you has the greater sin” (John 19:11). Is one type of sin ‘greater’ than another?

On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus, in company with his disciples (Judas excluded), left the city of Jerusalem and made his way eastward across the brook Kidron to the garden of Gethsemane. After the agonizing events in the garden, the Lord was accosted by a band of Jewish officials who bound him and took him first to Annas, a former high priest, and then to his infamous son-in-law, Caiaphas (Jn. 18:12-14).

Since the Jews didn’t have the authority to administer capital punishment, Caiaphas dispatched the Lord to Pilate, the then Roman governor, for official endorsement of the anticipated bloody deed (John 18:28ff; John 11:47-53). It thus was Caiaphas who **delivered Christ** to the Roman authorities.

Special interest should be given to the term “greater” in John 19:11. It is an adjective indicating a comparison. First, it implies sin on the part of Pilate. Though the ruler knew that Jesus was not guilty of any crime deserving death (John 18:38; 19:4, 6), he nonetheless weakened and turned the Savior over to the mob.

Second, the text clearly suggests a **greater degree of culpability** on the part of Caiaphas. Why was this?

Caiaphas’ Greater Sin

Caiaphas was a Jewish high priest and son-in-law of a former high priest (Annas — John 18:13). He had been surrounded with the influence of the Hebrew Scriptures his entire life. He of all people **should have known** the testimony of the Bible. Thus, he should have been familiar with many of the more than 300 Old Testament prophecies that detailed the identifying qualities of the Messiah.

There was **no excuse** for his role in the death of God’s Son. His heart was simply encrusted with rebellion (2 Corinthians 3:14).

Without question Pontius Pilate sinned by weakly caving in to political pressure. He knew that the motive of the Jewish leaders was ungodly (Matthew 27:18) and likely that their evidence was suspect (Matthew 26:59). But for fear of falling out of favor with Caesar (John 19:12), he condemned Christ to execution on behalf of the Jews.

As bad as Pilate’s sin of weakness and “political correctness” was, it wasn’t depraved to the degree of **calculated rebellion** that saturated the soul of Caiaphas. Thus, the spiritual leader’s responsibility was greater, because of his broader knowledge and his opportunity to believe and yield to what was right.

Other Cases of Greater Sin

But this account isn't the only case where accountability for sin is viewed in varying measures of guilt.

When Israelites bowed before the golden calf at Mount Sinai, Moses charged them with committing a “great sin” (Exodus 32:30). A **great sin** appears to be more serious, in some sense, than just sin.

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he denounced any Christian man who neglected his family.

“But if anyone does not provide for his people, and especially his own household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8).

In passages that speak of greater degrees of punishment, it becomes obvious that there are varying levels of sinfulness. It is possible for evil people to become worse and still worse yet (2 Timothy 3:13).

And so, according to biblical teaching, there will be **more punishment** for some than others (Matt. 11:20ff; Lk. 12:47-48; Heb. 10:28-29; Jas. 3:1; 2 Pet. 2:20-21).

Sharpening Our Understanding of Sin

It must be observed that all sin—**any** sin—is a serious matter, since “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). In employing metaphoric analogy involving conception, birth, maturation, and death, James declares that lust (desire), once conceived, gives birth to sin. Then when sin is allowed to grow, the result is death (i.e., eternal separation from God — James 1:15).

Someone has called this the genealogy of sin. Of particular interest is the fact that “sin,” as it is set forth in this text, is preceded by the Greek article, i.e., “the sin.” Sin is not viewed merely as an abstraction. **Each sin** is an act of rebellion on its own. If left unchecked, it will result in eternal death. Donald Burdick’s comment is insightful when he observes:

“James is not suggesting that only when sin has reached its full development does it result in death. The penalty of sin of any kind or extent is spiritual death” (1981, 172).

If **any** sin potentially is damning — even those transgressions that men consider minor (e.g., that “little white lie”) — how may it be said that one sin is greater than another?

The issue does not lie in the sin itself but in the **circumstances that accompany sin**. Let us briefly illustrate this highlighting principles stated or implied in some of the passages cited earlier, reminding ourselves again, that **any** sin that remains unforgiven according to the prescribed manner is deadly.

Presumption greater than ignorance

A **sin of “presumption”** is greater than a sin committed “unwittingly” because the former issues from arrogance, while the latter is done out of ignorance. Consider this.

“And if one person sins unwittingly, then he shall offer a she-goat a year old for a sin-offering. And the priest shall make atonement for the soul that errs, when he sins unwittingly, before Jehovah, to make atonement for him; and he shall be forgiven. You shall have one law for him that does anything unwittingly, for him that is home-born among the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourns among them. But the soul that does anything with a high hand [presumptuously],

whether he is home-born or a sojourner, the same blasphemeth Jehovah; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of Jehovah, and has broken his commandment, that soul shall be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him” (Numbers 15:27-31).

It is no wonder that the psalmist prayed:

“Keep your servant from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be upright, and I shall be innocent from great transgression” (Psalm 19:13).

Notice that the “presumptuous” sin is a “great” transgression, and the practice of yielding to “presumptuous” sins makes the man the slave of his own weaknesses.

Teaching error which causes another to be lost

To teach a dogma that jeopardizes the soul of another is a greater wrong than advocating a position that technically may be incorrect, yet has no eternal consequence.

Greater consequences

Some sins are “greater” because of the consequences they bear. A man who hates his brother is, in principle, a murderer (1 John 3:15). Should such a disposition be sustained, he will be lost. The hater may not, however, suffer **temporal penalty** for the malicious attitude.

On the other hand, the person who commits an actual murder may be imprisoned for years or even be executed. The latter sin is more serious in terms of the **immediate** price to be paid.

Some sins on the part of Christians warrant extreme discipline on behalf of the offender (expulsion of fellowship — 1 Cor. 5), while other offenses require patience and further instruction (Romans 14).

The Christian who abandons the faith and goes back into the world, making no effort to restrain sinning, is committing a greater sin than the poor soul who does not know the gospel. This clearly is the implication of Hebrews 10:26-31 and 2 Peter 2:20-21. The former text mentions the “sorer punishment” of the apostate, while the latter passage speaks of the “last state” as being “worse” than the “first” — possibly suggesting that he will be harder to reach with the truth and certainly indicating a greater condemnation (Luke 12:47-48).

Some sins more destructive

One sin may be greater than another in terms of its inherent **destructiveness**. It is one thing to sin privately and so forfeit the blessings provided by the Creator for one's temporal and eternal welfare. It is quite another thing to live with so much reckless abandon that others are spiritually wounded arriving at last beyond the pale of redemption. Of such Jesus said:

“Whoever causes one of these little ones that believes on me to stumble, it would be better for them to have a millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6).

It is not difficult to see the point of emphasis in this frightening warning.

Weakness versus rebellion

There appears to be an intensification of evil between the person who merely falls into sin through weakness and that of the degenerate, calloused individual who shamelessly mocks things sacred. Many scholars have called attention to the progressiveness of evil depicted in Psalm 1.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful" (Psalm 1:1).

A. F. Kirkpatrick observed:

*"The three clauses of the verse with their **threefold parallelism** (walk, stand, sit: counsel, way, sit session): [wicked, sinners, scornful] emphasize the godly man's entire avoidance of association with evil and evil-doers in every form and degree. They denote **successive steps in a career of evil, and form a climax**" (1906, 3).*

One cannot but be reminded of the "unjust judge" in the Lord's parables. He had regard for neither God nor man (Luke 18:1ff). The latter disposition frequently follows the former.

— *Christian Courier Magazine*

God is good

The Bible is very clear in affirming that God is a being of absolute goodness. The Psalmist declared: “Good and upright is Jehovah?” (25:8; cf. 100:5). Whatever God does, therefore, is good — whether or not man can understand it (Isaiah 55:8-9).

God is just.

God is also just. Justice is one of the elements that lies at the very foundation of his sovereign rule (Psalm 89:14). The Judge of the earth always “does what is right” (Genesis 18:25). As finite beings with limited understanding, however, we are unable to appreciate fully this reality.

When Job went through his anguished ordeal, in moments of weakness, he thought that God occasionally deals unjustly with people. He charged that Jehovah is not always good; sometimes, the patriarch alleged, he mocks “at the calamity of the innocent” (9:23).

Later, when confronted with the power and wisdom of the Creator (chapters 38-41), Job confessed that his uninformed accusations had obscured the true plan of the Almighty (42:2-3).

The wages of sin is death

Those who spend eternity estranged from the presence of the Lord (cf. Mt. 25:41; 2 Thes. 1:7-9), will do so because that is what they deserve. The “wages” of sin is death (Romans 6:23), and eternal “death” is separation from the good and gracious Maker of mankind (Revelation 20:14-15).

THIS is clearly sustained by the Scriptures, and it is utterly fatal to the annihilation theory. "But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; who will render to every man according to his deeds" Romans 2:5-6. "I the Lord search the hearts, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings." Jer. 17:9-10.

The foregoing texts apply directly to the future state, and plainly say that every man's punishment will be "according to his deeds." As there are many grades of character among the unbelieving here upon earth, so there will be many degrees of woe among the lost hereafter. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." "He that soweth bountifully, shall reap also bountifully." Every act, word, and thought of our life is seed cast out on life's turbulent waters; these seeds will be swept ashore, take root, and bear a great harvest. You will reap what you sow. The more seeds of wickedness you have cast out, the greater will be your harvest. "Sow the wind and reap the whirlwind."

But will some have greater damnation than others? "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretense ye make long prayers: therefore ye shall receive greater damnation." Matt. 23:14.

Light rates the sinfulness of sin. According to the degree of light a man has, sin is sinful to him. Paul says "sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful." **Knowledge of the commandment is what made sin "exceeding sinful."** Jesus said to Pilate, "He that delivered me unto thee hath the *greater sin*." John 19:11.

By consenting to the wish of the Jews and condemning Christ to be crucified, Pilate committed an awful sin. Yet Christ said that the one who delivered him **into Pilate's hands had the "greater sin." That was Judas Iscariot. He had more light than Pilate. Judas had once a blessed part in that sacred ministry. Because he had more light, his sin was greater. The greater the light, the deeper the sin**

"And Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind. And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also? Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth." John 9:39-41.

"If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father. " John 15:22, 24.

Light, I repeat, rates the sinfulness of sin. That being true, we can easily see how men will be punished "according to their deeds"; how they must reap what they sow. Those whose sins are "exceeding sinful" because they reject greater light will receive a "greater damnation." "That servant which knew his lord's will" — had a divine revelation—and prepared not himself "shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required." Luke 12:47-48.

Though not only the wicked, but “all the nations that forget God” (Psalm 9:17), will be turned into hell, yet in eternity it will be more tolerable for those nations than for the wicked wretches that willfully and knowingly went against light and truth. **Although all will be cast into the same hell, conscience will be a principal part of eternal torment, and punishment of *sense* and *separation* will be much greater to some than to others.**

Thus, we see not only that light rates the sinfulness of crime here, but that it will rate the punishment of the damned in hell forever. Whatever the damnation of the ungodly will be, it must and will be just. Romans 3:8. “And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city.” Matthew 10:14-15.

“Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not: Woe unto thee, Chorazin woe unto thee, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and in ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be the more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you.

And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shall be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.” Matthew 11:20-24.

Jesus upbraided these: cities and declared that if he had done in Sodom the same works that he did in them, those ancient people would have repented and would not have been destroyed, and that in the day of judgment, Sodom would have it more tolerable than they.

The punishment of Sodom will not be so great. If that punishment were simply annihilation, such language would be meaningless.

Of some, Jesus said, 'It were better if they never had been born.' **Backsliders will receive greater punishment than those who were never saved.** "For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness." 2 Peter 2:18-21. "For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought as worthy, who hath trodden under-foot the Son of God, and counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord." Hebrews 10:26-31.

How solemn these truths! Of all the millions in the dark regions of despair, the man and woman that were once saved and then fell away from that state and are lost forever will have the greatest punishment. Their punishment will be a "much sorer punishment" than that of those who were never saved. Through all eternity they will remember a time when they were saved, when the sweet peace of heaven filled their souls. They will remember those seasons of grace and glory, the sweet hymns of Zion, and the fellowship of their Creator. They will look back to a time when their hearts were pure, and when they were ready to enter heaven to spend eternity.

Oh, what a remembrance for lost souls! They bartered away the priceless treasure of salvation for some trifle, some of earth's vanities. Now they are lost—eternally lost; forever cut off from Christ and all that is pure and lovely; sinking farther and farther from home, heaven, and loved ones — eternally separated. Yet, once they were saved. It would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness.

From all the foregoing texts, we can clearly see, that men's punishment will be "according to their deeds"; that some will have "greater damnation," a "much sorer punishment," than others; that some will have "few stripes," others "many," according to the degree of light received; that it will be the "more tolerable" for some than for others.

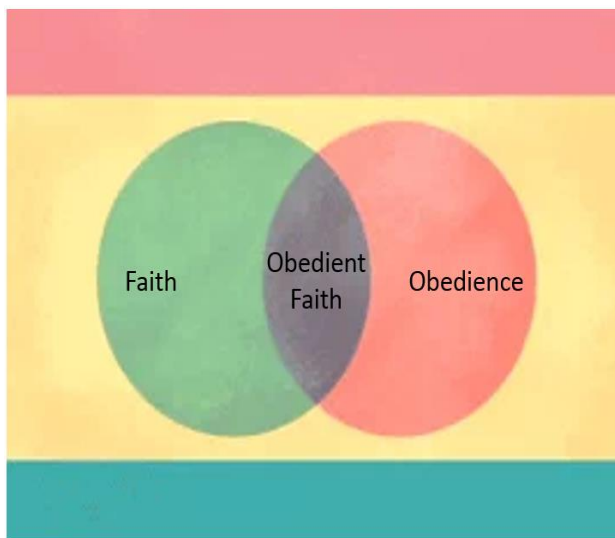
This stands in square contradiction to the false doctrine of annihilation. If the ungodly will simply be burned into ashes, as blind guides vainly hope, such scriptures have no meaning. The annihilation theory stands in opposition and contradiction to every plain text cited here under this heading. An unconscious man, lifeless, and reduced to a bit of ashes, cannot suffer²

² Riggle, H. M. (2005). [Hell and Everlasting Punishment](#). James L. Fleming.

AT THE NEXUS OF GRACE & GLORY

Five Steps For Saving:

- **HEARING:**
- Romans 10: 17; Matthew 7: 24 - 27
- **BELIEVING:**
- Hebrews 11: 6; Mark 16: 15, 16
- **REPENTING:**
- Acts 2: 38; 17: 30; Luke 13: 3
- **CONFESSING:**
- Matthew 10: 32, 33; Acts 8: 36, 37
- **BAPTISM:**
- Romans 6: 3 – 5; Acts 8: 36 – 38



O That Will Be Glory

2. *Wh* O that will be glory for me, e grace,

I an Glory for me, glory for me; ce,

When by His grace I shall look on His face, e

That will be glory, be glory for me. me.

